



Conversations of Faith



The Epiphany and the Three Gifts

"Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you." (Is 60:1)

By Timothy Andries, January 2022

Introduction

1. The word *"Epiphany"* means *"a sudden manifestation or perception or an enlightening discovery"*. We see in the first reading from the prophet Isaiah, references to light and the splendor of the Lord that will shine within us. The Magi or Three Wise Men followed a star to Bethlehem. The star is the light of faith, the divine revelation that pierced through the cold darkness of night and led them across the desert.

2. But why call them "wise"? Were they extraordinarily educated or gifted? The simple answer is no. Their wisdom was manifested in recognizing the revelation of faith and following it, or should we say, following Him. The light of faith led them to its very source, Christ Himself. In finding the Christ-Child, they offered Him gifts. The gifts that they gave are the focus of this meditation. What the Magi gave were not simply physical gifts, they were manifestations of the divine light of revealed truth within them. We could put it another way, the gifts they offered were a response to the gift they had received. They were given the great gift of the Word of God Incarnate.

In our journey through the wilderness or desert of life, how can we imitate "the Wise Men" and offer our gifts to the Lord?

“and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh”. (Gospel reading for the Epiphany)

I. The First Gift, Gold “Wisdom”



3. Gold is normally symbolic of royalty or exaltedness, more commonly associated with kings, queens, and emperors. In Christian art gold also symbolizes holiness or sanctity. St. Irenaeus saw the allegorical meaning of offering gold as *“a symbol of royalty, represents the kingship of Jesus” (Commentary on Matthew)*. We notice that the Magi met with King Herod, but only to ask about the Christ child to be born. Yet they enter into the stable and prostrate themselves before Jesus. The early Church Fathers teach us that it was revealed by divine revelation that this child was the true King. Gold was a common tribute paid to kings by visitors. Here the Magi offer the precious gift of gold, in recognition of Jesus Christ the King.

4. The gifts given did not originate with the Magi or with us for that matter. Our offering of gold is a response to a gift already given. Wisdom is *“faith made perfect, the mind guided by the Holy Spirit to gain entry into the very life of God”*. (Theology for the Laity, Vol 66, No. 3). Jesus is the perfect or “golden model” of faith. His wisdom shines in that, His every word and action was directed in the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father. That life of faith is the gift of gold that is infused in our souls at baptism. In Our Lord Jesus, we are offered a life in an intimate union with the Triune God.

5. So how do I offer my Lord this gift of gold? To quote St. Gregory the Great, *“Gold is Christ's wisdom, which shines in us.” (Commentary on Matthew)*. Our gold shines as our heart, mind, body, and soul perfects the imitation of Our Lord. As grace and virtue grow within us and we are made perfect, the rusty scales of sin fall away. The more the scales of sin fall away, the true beauty of the soul shines forth.... like Gold. It is for us to reveal a life guided by the love and wisdom of God Himself. Consider your own life as an offering to Christ the King, and ask yourself where our gold has become dull and needs to be polished.

II. The Second Gift, Frankincense “Piety”



6. Frankincense or incense, is commonly used during liturgical celebrations and temple worship. Our Jewish elder brothers in faith burned incense in the Temple and Holy of Holies in Jerusalem. In the Book of Revelation, incense was the prayers of the saints rising to the altar of God. (*see Rev 5:8, 8:3*). The sweet-smelling aroma and smoke were symbolic of the reality of our prayers and supplications rising to the heavens. The Magi recognized in this child, something far greater and more powerful than King Herod sitting in his palace or the Emperor in mighty Rome. St Irenaeus says that in offering Him frankincense or let's just use the word incense, they recognized and worshipped the Christ-child as God. (*Ignatius Study Bible, Commentary on Matthew*).

7. Incense is also a reference to Jesus' "*priestly*" function, in coming to intercede for humanity as the one mediator between God and man. Priests offer sacrifices and prayers to God for the people. Jesus Christ, the eternal High Priest offered Himself as a sacrifice to the Father. Scripture tells us that Jesus' life was one of constant prayer. The Last Supper and the Passion are the crowning acts of His priesthood.

8. The Magi were given the gift of prayer and devotion. In their offering of incense, the Magi gave homage and adoration to the One True God. St Gregory the Great said that our prayers and adoration we offer to God are likened to the sweet odor of incense offered up in the Temple. By right and obligation of baptism, the laity is given a share in the priesthood of Christ. When we pray, especially during Mass, for others we offer our incense as the priesthood of the faithful. (*Ignatius Study Bible, Commentary on Matthew*).

9. Prayer that is from the heart, humble and honest is likened to offering incense to the Lord God in the Temple of the soul. To implore His blessings and intercessions, to praise Him and bless Him at all times, is to worship and adore God always. The respectful manner in which we receive the sacraments, or attend Mass are some primary ways of offering our incense. If we do not pray, if the sacraments and the Mass are done without reverence or purpose, if God is an "after-thought", then our temple will be desolate and empty.

III. The Third Gift, Myrrh “Purity”



10. *“Myrrh, as a burial ointment, signifies the humanity of Christ, especially in his Passion and death.” (St Irenaeus, Ignatius Study Bible).* While it’s true that it is a strange gift to bring a child, it was the recognition of Jesus Christ as true God and true man. This gift points us to Jesus the sacrificial lamb and his bitter passion. The Christ-Child came not only as God, as Eternal High Priest, but also as the sacrificial Lamb to make satisfaction for the sins of humanity.

11. The burial ointment points to our being baptized into His death so that we may rise with Him. Our Lord would offer His sinless flesh as a sin offering to the Father. His death would be our life. Our Lord’s pure humanity serves as a model for our own. Jesus’ pure humanity was free of sin and its consequences so that His human will was perfectly in-line with the will of Our Heavenly Father.

12. If myrrh was used to preserve and prevent decay, then how do we apply that to ourselves? St Gregory the Great points to the spiritual meaning of offering myrrh *“as our daily self-sacrifices” (Ignatius Study Bible, Matthew).* Myrrh for us is the daily dying to sin or mortification. Dying to sin means joining Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and uniting ourselves to His *“not my will, but your will be done”, (Matt 26:39).* Myrrh is taking up our crosses and following Him in conforming our lives to His.

13. Myrrh is our examining our consciences to find our faults to recognize our weaknesses. These are the areas in life that need the most prayer and grace. Myrrh is setting ourselves aside to make room for the virtues, graces, and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit. As St Paul put it, putting on the new man or new woman. One of the most powerful and beautiful ways to achieve that purity and humble oneself is the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Conclusion

14. These gifts if meditated on and applied to our lives will be a pleasing act of homage to Our Lord and King.

May you shine like gold before the Lord in wisdom and holiness, may your soul be filled with the incense of prayer and adoration, and may you be made pure before the Lord. Amen

The Month of January, dedicated to the Holy Name of Jesus



Prayer in Honor of the Most Holy Name of Jesus

O, Divine Jesus, Thou hast promised that anything we ask of the Eternal Father in Thy name shall be granted. O Eternal Father, In the name of Jesus, for the love of Jesus, in fulfillment of this promise, and because Jesus has said it, grant us our petitions for the sake of Jesus, Thy Divine Son.

Amen.

Sources

1. Daily readings are found at <https://www.usccb.org>. Daily Bible readings
2. Scripture Commentary from the Ignatius Study Bible, New Testament, Ignatius Press, 2001
3. https://rosarycenter.org/client_media/files/newsletter_archive/1166n3.pdf. Theology for the Laity from the Rosary Center.